Conflict Is Not Bad: Interpersonal Conflict and Knowledge Sharing

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ABSTRACT

This study proposes that interpersonal conflict causes behavioral change in both knowledge sharing and knowledge acquisition. According to the consequences of conflict on group effectiveness, this study argues that relationship conflict hinders knowledge exchange; yet, a moderate level of task conflict can contribute to knowledge exchange. A total of two hundred and two employees participated in the survey in which they had to exchange knowledge with coworkers in order to complete the group task. The results, using structural equation modeling (SEM), show that all hypotheses except one were supported. The authors also provide some academic contributions and management implications at the end of this article.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict has been broadly defined as the perceptions held by the parties involved, in that they hold discrepant views or have interpersonal incompatibilities (Jehn, 1995). Typically, interpersonal conflicts at workplaces involve interaction between two interdependent parties that perceive incompatibility of goals, interests, values, or ideas (Jehn, 1995; Tjosvold, 1985; Van de Vliert and De Dreu, 1994). Additionally, some sources of conflict unrelated to task performance include demographic and group diversity (Pelled, 1996; Pelled et al., 1999). This study focuses solely on interpersonal conflicts at workplaces.

According to Jehn (1995), since previous research suggested that conflict is detrimental to organizational functioning and since most researchers paid attention to causes and consequences, it is essential for management to resolve this conflict in an attempt to avoid group dysfunction. Researchers have theorized that, under certain circumstances, conflict is beneficial, for example, non-routine tasks, moderate extent of conflict, positive approach to conflict, or appropriate task interdependence (Jehn, 1995; Tjosvold et al., 2003; Van de Vliert and De Dreu, 1994).

In recent times, the need to explore employees’ knowledge exchange within an organization has been emphasized (Chiu et al., 2006; Wasko and Faraj, 2005). In researchers’ and practitioners’ opinions, good relationships among team members can motivate employees to share their knowledge. This study aims to discuss the manner in which interpersonal conflicts influence knowledge exchange in an organization.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

People Cannot Exchange Knowledge If Conflict Exists

According to previous research, the exchange of knowledge among people who enjoy harmonious interpersonal relationships should be higher (Chiu et al., 2006; Inkpen and Tsang, 2005). We will expound this point from the social network perspective. Focusing on the patterns and implications of the relations within the collective, social network perspectives suggests that individuals and their actions (e.g., knowledge exchange) are interdependent rather than independent occurrences. For instance, close social interactions without any conflict enable individuals to increase the depth, extent, and efficiency of mutual knowledge exchange (Chiu et al., 2006).

Fundamentally, interpersonal conflict reduces the extent to which people share knowledge with each other. A team that experiences higher levels of conflict experiences lower levels of group performance (Jehn, 1995). The effective implementation of a strategic decision requires the active cooperation of team members (Amason, 1997). Likewise,
conflict (emotional conflict, task conflict, etc.) is likely to reduce the degree to which mutual and collective interaction exists within a group; this, in turn, is likely to result in poor performance (Li and Hambrick, 1998). Accordingly, in the present study, we posit that interpersonal conflict is incompatible with knowledge exchange.

People Can Exchange Knowledge If Conflict Exists

Although task conflict occurs in many organizational settings, its potential benefit is easily disregarded. In organizational settings where opposing views are openly discussed, task conflict can contribute to decision making (Tjosvold, 1985; Jehn, 1995). Scholars believe that constructive controversy—defined as a critical and open discussion of divergent perspectives including task-related facts, data, and opposing ideas—provides a good explanation of the potential benefit (Tjosvold, 1985). In light of the above, task conflict may be regarded as a special type of controversy that occurs when a person’s ideas, opinions, conclusions, theories, and information are incompatible with those of another. Task conflict is a common phenomenon observed in problem-solving processes and needs to be managed appropriately before it is productive (Jehn, 1995). Clearly, the key delineating feature of constructive controversy is the emphasis on a positive and respectful foundation when team members are discussing divergent viewpoints. In another words, a team member should state opposing position on the nature of unresolved task, rather hurt peer’s feeling as a purpose, while the conflict is raised.

According to Tjosvold and his colleagues (2003), people involved in controversies have been found to be motivated to understand others’ positions and to be appreciative of them. Every case of conflict in opinions is not detrimental, for example, Gottman and Parkhurst (1980) argue that, in case of a disagreement, close friends may provide constructive feedback to each other. Positive affect, prosocial behavior, and collaborative knowledge sharing among friends were present when they agreed and also when they disagreed. Constructive controversy can result in open-mindedness, interpersonal attraction, and incorporation of opposing views into one’s own (Tjosvold, 1985; Tjosvold and Deemer, 1980). Accordingly, a team may benefit from an exchange of different opinions regarding the work being done because the synthesis that occurs as a result of this conflict is generally superior to individual perspectives (Jehn, 1995).

RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

Research Model

The research model explaining knowledge exchange among employees incorporates two types of conflicts, i.e., relationship conflict and task conflict. Prior studies have highlighted the reciprocity in knowledge exchange that leads people to have a positive attitude toward knowledge sharing. Previous research has emphasized the harmful effects of relationship conflict on group effectiveness (Jehn, 1995), for example, intragroup knowledge exchange during decision making (Li and Hambrick, 2005). In addition, according to researchers, task conflict can contribute to group effectiveness under certain specific conditions (Chen and Tjosvold, 2002; Chen et al., 2006; Jehn, 1995). Accordingly, the present study proposes that moderate task conflict can improve both knowledge sharing and acquisition among employees.

Figure 1: Research Model
Hypotheses

The social exchange relationship is a major determinant of employees’ knowledge exchange (Bock et al., 2005). Employees who operate on the basis of their desire for fairness and reciprocity are likely to improve knowledge exchange. Prior studies, based on the social capital theory, suggest that people who share knowledge with others believe in reciprocity and those who regularly share knowledge with others appear to receive assistance more quickly when they ask for it (Wasko and Faraj, 2005).

H1: Knowledge acquisition correlates to knowledge sharing.

A relationship conflict occurs when there are interpersonal incompatibilities among group members, including tension, animosity, and annoyance within the group (Jehn, 1995). According to Jehn (1995), group members with interpersonal problems and those who are angry with each other will work less effectively and produce suboptimal products. According to Roseman, Wiest, and Swartz (1994), the threat and anxiety associated with a relationship conflict tend to inhibit people’s cognitive functioning in processing complex information and thus inhibit individual performance. Further, Kelley (1979) explained that an angry or hostile person simply loses perspective about the task being performed. Moreover, Baron (1991) found that effective communication and cooperation among group members was affected when interpersonal conflicts included components of anger and frustration. Empirically, relationship conflicts were also negatively associated with individuals’ satisfaction, their liking of other group members, and their intent to remain in the group (Jehn, 1995).

In this manner, a relationship conflict can prevent the exchange of information between team members and disintegrate the commitment that team members have toward each other (Amason and Sapienza, 1997). To the best of our knowledge, there is no direct empirical evidence to support that relationship conflict leads to a low level of knowledge-sharing activities among group members. However, it is reasonable to postulate that a relationship conflict, as an impediment to group effectiveness, hinders both knowledge sharing and knowledge acquisition.

H2: Knowledge sharing is negatively associated with relational conflict.

H3: Knowledge acquisition is negatively associated with relational conflict.

Simon and Peterson (2000) stated that scholars offered some possible explanations for the reason that task conflicts could lead to relationship conflicts. A primary argument is that task conflicts induce relationship conflicts as a result of misattribution. This implies that team members may misunderstand the focal person’s intention of improving the situation while different viewpoints emerge. The second reason is that team members may use emotionally harsh or bitter language to criticize their opponents’ advocacy in order to hurt their rivals (Pelled, 1996). Consequently, task conflicts result in tension, antagonism, and unhappiness among group members and unwillingness to work together in the future (Jehn, 1995). In addition, it is possible that a task conflict is triggered by a relationship conflict in which one group member intentionally makes another member’s life difficult (Jehn, 1995). A meta-analysis testing perceptions of a task and relationship conflict in groups revealed significant positive correlations between the two (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003). Simon and Peterson (2000) examined the interpretation and attribution process as a driving mechanism for this co-occurrence. According to this mechanism, a task conflict is often misattributed as being personal in nature or motive and thus often leads to a relationship conflict (Simons and Peterson, 2000). Accordingly, we propose the following hypotheses.

H4: Relational conflict is positively associated with task conflict.

Task conflict occurs when there are disagreements among group members with regard to the content of the tasks being performed, including differences in viewpoints, ideas, and opinions (Jehn, 1995). Although some studies have revealed that task conflict leads to negative group effectiveness (Simon and Peterson, 2000), Jehn (1995) advocated an alternative perspective according to which task conflict can be beneficial to task performance in certain group structures, for example, while performing non-routine tasks. Carnevale and Probst (1998) explained these effects in terms of cognitive load—when conflict intensifies and arousal increases and so does the cognitive load, which interferes with cognitive flexibility and creative thinking. Task conflict, therefore, appears to be completely functional with respect to
knowledge exchange within a team. Previous studies provide two reasons in this regard. First, when people confront issues in a conflict, they receive the opportunity to learn about different perspectives from other team members. In contrast, in the absence of a task conflict, teams may not realize potential inefficiencies and may lose creative opportunities (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003). Second, voicing minority views and heterogeneity of perspectives might improve group problem solving (Tjosvold et al., 2003). Schweiger et al. (1989) found that the use of interaction techniques (i.e., devil’s advocacy and consensus approaches) that force team members to disagree and debate the merits of different alternatives results in better decisions. Similarly, Schulz-Hardt, Mayer, and Frey (2002) showed that teams made better decisions when prediscussion preferences were in disagreement rather than in agreement.

However, the link between task conflict and group effectiveness is not “perfect” (Simons and Peterson, 2000). Numerous scholars recently advocated that extremely high levels of task conflict can sometimes lead to a reduction in member satisfaction as well as group effectiveness (e.g., Amason and Sapienza, 1997; Jehn, 1995). De Dreu and Weingart (2003) argued that although a prediscussion disagreement appears to enhance the quality of group decision-making, this positive effect diminishes when task conflict becomes more intense. When participants confront a great degree of task conflict during competitive and hostile negotiations, their cognitive flexibility and creative thinking decrease substantially (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003). Since this does not affect enhancing the decision quality or sharing understanding, it is evident that team members conduct knowledge sharing and acquire new knowledge. On the other hand, it is not necessary for team members to exchange information in the case of extremely low levels of task conflict. In addition, Jehn (1995) hypothesized the nonlinear relationship between task conflict and performance, in that task conflict is positively related to performance to a certain extent, beyond which individual performance declines. This rationale conforms to our inference that a moderate level of task conflict may increase a team member’s opportunity of knowledge sharing and knowledge acquisition by means of cognitive and cooperative negotiation. Accordingly, we propose the next two hypotheses.

**H5:** Knowledge sharing is positively associated with moderate levels of task conflict.

**H6:** Knowledge acquisition is positively associated with moderate levels of task conflict.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

**Sample and Data Collection**

We examined the hypotheses using the survey data collected from the senior students of the Information Management Department. They attended evening school, and each of them held a full-time job. This enabled them to answer our questionnaire through actual knowledge-exchanging experiences. Two hundred and two students were invited to take part in the study. Of them, 156 returned the samples, and 151 valid samples were obtained (return rate 74.75%). Some samples with missing values and those filled by people who did not hold full-time jobs, did not have colleagues, and had no working experience were discarded.

**Scale Development**

The scale—that the reliability and validity were examined by other researchers—was adopted from literature. The items measuring task conflict and relationship conflict were adopted from Jehn (1995). The measures of knowledge sharing and acquisition were adopted from Chiu et al. (2006) including the time spent on, relevance, and usefulness of the task. Prior to distributing the copies to respondents, we conducted some procedures to assure content validity. First, we modified some words according to the suggestions of five people, including a senior professor, an industrial manager, and three doctoral candidates. Next, 10 EMBA students took the pretest, and their feedback enhanced the quality of the scale. All items mentioned above were framed based on a workplace setting in order to ascertain the extent of respondents’ agreement on a 7-point Likert scale anchored by strongly agree (code 7) to strongly disagree (code 1).
Measurement Model Test

LISREL 8.50 was adopted to analyze the measurement model with maximum-likelihood estimation procedures (Bollen, 1989). Initial results of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) indicated that our model did not conform to the data in a significant manner. A careful and iterative inspection of the output obtained from LISREL revealed that some items did not load on the designated latent factors appropriately, such as standardized loading < 0.7 or is associated with high modification indices. We discarded these inappropriate items. We conducted the CFA again and found that the new measurement models exhibited an improved model fit. Overall, the model fit indices showed that the measurement model was a realistic representation of the data \[\chi^2(48) = 64.06, \text{ NFI} = 0.91, \text{ NNFI} = 0.96, \text{ CFI} = 0.97, \text{ GFI} = 0.92, \text{ RMSEA} = 0.052\], which was also fit, excluding NFI, which was slightly lower. The details of CFA are presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: CFA of Research Model</th>
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<tr>
<td>Construct</td>
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<td>Knowledge Sharing</td>
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<td>Knowledge Acquisition</td>
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<td>Task Conflict</td>
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<td>Relationship Conflict</td>
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<th>Table 2: Discriminant Validity of Scale</th>
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<td>Dimensions of Main Model</td>
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<tr>
<th>TEST #</th>
<th>Knowledge Sharing with</th>
<th>Knowledge Acquisition</th>
<th>Task Conflict</th>
<th>Relationship Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Knowledge Acquisition</td>
<td>116.24(9)</td>
<td>21.78(8)</td>
<td>94.46(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Task Conflict</td>
<td>149.68(9)</td>
<td>17.53(8)</td>
<td>132.15(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Relationship Conflict</td>
<td>160.38(9)</td>
<td>16.40(8)</td>
<td>143.98(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Knowledge Acquisition</td>
<td>169.95(9)</td>
<td>5.52(8)</td>
<td>164.47(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Task Conflict</td>
<td>180.73(9)</td>
<td>13.07(8)</td>
<td>67.66(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Relationship Conflict</td>
<td>115.05(9)</td>
<td>4.54(8)</td>
<td>110.51(1)</td>
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<th>Table 3: Correlation Matrix</th>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge Sharing</td>
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<td>Knowledge Acquisition</td>
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<td>Task Conflict</td>
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<td>Relationship Conflict</td>
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Prior to testing for a structural model, we showed that the measurement model had a satisfactory level of validity and reliability. The reliability of construct was examined based on CR (composition reliability) and AVE (average variance extracted) (Venkatraman, 1989). As per the reports in Table 2, CRs and AVEs are all above 0.7 and 0.5, respectively, and the scale represents internal consistency.

In CFA, factor loadings are good estimates of the validity of the observed variables because they can be viewed as regression coefficients in the regression of observed variables on latent variables (Venkatraman, 1989). Convergent
validity ensures that all items measure a single latent construct, and this is established if all item loadings are greater than or equal to the recommended cut-off level of 0.70 (Bassellier et al., 2003). Our results revealed that almost all the loadings of each latent variable are above the cut-off value. The details are presented in Table 1.

Discriminant validity reflects the level to which the measures for each dimension are distinctively different from each other. We applied the chi-square difference test to assess the discriminant validity of the measurement model (Bassellier et al., 2003). For each pair of constructs, the fit of a model was compared with that of the identified model in order to determine whether or not the two constructs are distinct (Venkatraman, 1989). Accordingly, we conducted six pair-wise tests (four constructs) for each model. The results are reported in Table 2. All Δχ² differences are significant above the level of Pr[χ²(1) ≥ 3.84] = 0.05, indicating strong support for discriminant validity (Bassellier et al., 2003; Venkatraman, 1989).

Overall, the evidences of good model fit—reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity—suggested that the measurement model was appropriate for testing the structural model at a subsequent stage. Additionally, the correlation matrixes of the main model, explicit model, and tacit model are reported in Table 3.

**Hypothesis Testing**

We analyzed our hypotheses based on the results obtained by LISREL. Fit indices are presented in Figure 2, and we can report the results as follows. H1 is supported such that the correlation coefficient is β = 0.49 (t = 4.39, p < 0.001). H2 and H3 are supported such that the path coefficients are β = −0.24 (t = −1.69, p < 0.1) and β = −0.30 (t = −2.20, p < 0.05). H4 is also supported such that the path coefficient was β = 0.64 (t = 6.26, p < 0.001).

In order to examine the moderate level of task conflict as a moderator in knowledge activities, H5 and H6 were tested by a reduced sample. We calculated the average scores of three task conflict items and discarded some samples whose means were either greater than 6 or less than 2. Accordingly, the new sample was a collection of the moderate level of task conflict such that we could test H5 and H6. The results of CFA revealed that the measurement model was an appropriate representation of the data [χ²(48) = 64.06, NFI = 0.91, NNFI = 0.96, CFI = 0.97, GFI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.052]. With respect to the results of structural equation modeling (SEM) (in Figure 2), the path coefficients are β = 0.06 (t = 0.35, p > 0.1, nonsignificant) for H5 and β = 0.26 (t = 1.66, p < 0.1, significant) for H6.

In brief, H1, H2, H3, and H4 were all supported according to the full sample tested by using SEM. H5 and H6 were examined by the reduced sample with moderate level of task conflict. The results showed that H5 was not supported but H6 was.

![Figure 2: Result of Structural Model of Full Sample & Reduced Sample](image)

**DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION**

This study makes a contribution to the existing research on intragroup conflict and knowledge management by specifying as to when conflict is and is not detrimental. The results show that different conflict will help, hinder, or have no significant impact on knowledge exchange.
Some important implications derived from the current study are presented by authors. First, knowledge sharing and knowledge acquisition for each employee in the workplace interweave mutually and reciprocally such that both are affected by interpersonal conflict. Second, the current model postulated that relationship conflict and task conflict affect knowledge exchange simultaneously. Interestingly, although neither relationship conflict nor task conflict affects knowledge exchange individually (see Table 3), most hypotheses are supported. The effect of suppression (Cohen and Cohen, 1983) indicates that the association between task conflict and relationship conflict conceals their actual influence with knowledge exchange. Relationship conflict, although not correlated with knowledge exchange, is correlated with available measure of task conflict and thus adds irrelevant variance to it and reduces its relationship with knowledge exchange. In light of the regression technique, the inclusion of the suppressor (task conflict) in the regression equation eliminates (suppresses) unwanted variance in relationship conflict in effect and enhances the association between relationship conflict and knowledge exchange. Third, we proposed that task conflict has both direct and indirect effects. However, empirical results revealed that the argument was supported in the knowledge acquisition context only (H6), while it did not conform to our expectations in the knowledge sharing context (H5). Confining to our model, one possible explanation for the situation is that knowledge acquisition and relationship conflict are mediators between task conflict and knowledge sharing.

We provide some suggestions to the management according to the results of the study. First, relationship conflict and interpersonal incompatibilities will prevent team members from engaging in knowledge exchanging activities, i.e., sharing and acquisition. Groups composed of harmonic relationships are known to have performance advantages such as increased potential for cooperation and knowledge transfer among team members. Second, it is encouraged that each group member provides different descriptions of tasks, involving viewpoints, ideas, and opinions (Jehn, 1995; Simon and Peterson, 2000). Jehn (1995) also states that “the open discussions and conflicts about task content promote critical evaluation of problems and decision options.” The results of the current study supported the notions. However, our evidences explain the dilemma that relationship conflict not only coincides with task conflict but also obstructs knowledge exchange. It is unavoidable for a cooperative team to suppress the discussion of opposing views; however, we suggest that only constructive controversy — an open-minded discussion of opposing positions with no relationship conflict — has been found to be an important complement to team goals (Tjosvold, 1985).

CONCLUSION

The role of conflict that interpersonal conflict (relationship and task conflict) is not associated with knowledge exchange (knowledge acquisition and sharing) is an interesting issue in knowledge management. This study concludes that although relationship conflict is harmful to knowledge exchange, the same is not the case with task conflict. It depends on the magnitude of task conflict whether or not the task conflict is beneficial to knowledge sharing. In particular, extremely high or low discrepant opinions, ideas, and viewpoints cannot foster knowledge exchange among team members. Our empirical results show that moderate task conflict has indirect and direct effects on knowledge acquisition. With respect to management implication, it is evident that team members in a group should encourage an appropriate discussion of a controversy, which is constructive and task-oriented, in order to create, share, and acquire more knowledge. On the other hand, relationship conflict with aggression definitely hinders knowledge exchange in the workplace.

REFERENCES


